

*Border Dogs* by Karen Palmer

Chapter One

The patrol rode his quarterhorse over land that looked like the sea, the night-vision goggles turning the 2 a.m. desert green, a dream of liquid hills and shifting sands, tumbleweeds, arroyos, dried riverbeds. He was working a desolate stretch of the southern U.S. border, nearly a hundred miles in from the Pacific Ocean, a place where there were no substations, no checkpoints, and no twelve-foot-high steel fence, only the hard-won knowledge of where one country stopped and another began.

A shredded cloud drifted clear of the moon and James saw wild mustard blooming in the roots of a stunted scrub oak, lacy flowers the goggles colored a dazzling nuclear lime. The sparse vegetation rustled with creatures: snakes and birds, lizards, rodents. Slowing his horse, he passed the reins from right hand to left, then reached up to fasten the goggles' harness more securely at the back of his head. The whistling March wind stung the tips of his ears. He brought both hands to his mouth and blew into his palms; he'd forgotten his gloves. Beneath him, the horse snorted and tossed its head, its flanks quivering. The shank of the bit glittered in its black mouth.

A quarter-mile ahead his partner broke into a trot as the illegals they'd been tracking charged through the scrub.

The radio at James's hip hummed with static and Leo's excited voice crackled out at him, "Hey, old man . . . I've got 'em now! Pinche pollos . . . gotcha!" James heard muffled shouting, the snap of branches. Leo's voice came again, "Gotcha!" and three men tumbled free, followed quickly by a fourth. The pollos fell to their knees, hands crossed on top of their heads.

Leo cried, "Where the fuck are you, James!"

But a green blur had caught his attention, a lone figure scurrying east toward the canyon. The figure ran upright and sure-footed, as if certain of both course and destination.

Coyote, thought James—the pollos' guide, paid to shepherd illegals over the line. The smuggling of human beings was a federal beef, an automatic ten years. James *had* to get him. But the only way was to cut the guy off before he reached the canyon.

He slapped the reins and jabbed his boot heels, urging the quarterhorse into a canter. He rode with hips dropped deeply into the saddle, loins and waist kept supple to absorb the horse's movement. The sound of hooves hitting the sand was like a muffled drum roll. Through the goggles, he saw a green bounce of terrain, and the coyote, running hard, arms and legs pumping wildly. But James on the quarterhorse quickly gained ground.

Within twenty yards of his prey, the rocky lip of the canyon became visible, the chasm gaping darkly beyond. The horse thundered forward. "¡Inmigración!" James shouted. "¡Párate, la migra!" *Stop! Immigration!* But the man ran all the harder. James took up the rope coiled on the saddle horn. He fed the looped end into the palm of his right hand. Closer, closer . . . he shook out the loop, raised his arm high and swung counterclockwise. Spiraling his wrist, he accelerated the spin, then leaned from the saddle and threw. But the coyote had inexplicably stopped dead in his tracks. When he turned to run back the way that he'd come, the loop whizzed harmlessly past, dropping onto a clump of thick brush. The branches emptied of angry birds.

As James veered away, the rope, hung up more than he'd realized, buzzed from his left hand, burning him. Cursing, he reined up hard. The quarterhorse skidded into a halt, its hind legs sliding underneath it. James trotted back around. He yanked repeatedly on the rope, attempting to free it. But the brush was captured and fully secured.

Goddamnit! James dismounted.

He raced in front of the horse, where his legs got tangled up in the line; it nearly decked him. Circling the brush, he swiveled his head—the goggles impaired his peripheral vision—searching for a telltale green glow. But he saw nothing. He hurried back to the spot where he'd seen the coyote stop, and there

he found a kicked-up pile of sand, tracks zigzagging away. He followed them just far enough to determine that, in spite of the about-face, the coyote was still headed toward the canyon. James jogged to the horse. With some difficulty, he freed the caught rope. He wound it into a coil and mounted again. He sat in the saddle a moment, catching his breath.

He felt an ooze of blood in his palm.

In the distance, a small white object lifted and spun in the air. From the radio, Leo's voice came again: "Where the fuck are you, James?" And then the coyote disappeared over the edge.

James stared into the canyon. Fifteen sheer feet led down to bedrock obscured by dried scrub, an undercurrent of jagged stones and discarded clothing, broken bottles, burned tires. To his right, a small green figure swam through the debris. The coyote was aimed at Mexico.

James knew he'd never catch up on foot. Useless, too, to follow on horseback from up on the ridge. Southward, the canyon deepened impossibly. He'd never have an opportunity to get down.

He should just let the guy go.

But watching the coyote's frantic progress, he thought: No one ran that hard, not without a reason.

And then he remembered a diagonal cut in the rock, a narrow path down. The cut was a short distance north, and initially, would take him in the wrong direction, but once on the canyon floor, he could make up the time.

He rode to the cut and turned the horse in. Leaned back in the saddle, he loosened the reins. Down they went. At bottom, the animal nickered and James bent forward and stroked its hot neck, breathing in a smell of rawhide and sweat. The radio fizzed at his hip; rock interfered with the signal. Even with the goggles, the canyon was dark. Rivers of shadow poured from the steep sides. James was acutely conscious of the horse's gait, a blunt clopping against the hard floor.

He squeezed his legs and took the horse up into a trot, high-stepping it around obstacles. Minutes passed, and still he saw nothing. He hated like hell to give up. But he was about to when, rounding a bend, he sighted a white shirt

thrashing in the bushes, legs that waded through the tangled undergrowth. Trotting forward, James again readied the rope, feeding the looped end into his palm.

But something diverted his attention, something wriggling, down low. A creature darted out from the brush. Before James could register what he was looking at, the quarterhorse spooked, whinnying and bucking, rearing on its hind legs—and then James was sliding, shooting down from the saddle, the rope still in his hands. He landed on his hip, a bone-jarring thump. The goggles flew. James rolled away from the horse, afraid of being trampled. Pain shot up his side. But a surge of adrenaline brought him instantly to his feet. Blinded, he could still hear the coyote, rustling in the brush, panting, and moaning softly.

The coyote cried out and James hurtled forward. Branches tore at his face and his hands. Now he saw the white shirt; he could almost touch the man's back. His pounding heart felt ready to burst. Diving, he closed the gap between them.

He went down face-first, but on the way, managed to wrap his arms around the coyote's left leg—a padded stick. The coyote dragged him several yards, branches snapping. James's knees and shins bumped over rocks. He couldn't believe the guy's strength! He was losing equipment all over the place: shield, pistol, flashlight, canteen. Worse, his hold was slipping. In desperation, he hauled back hard on the leg. A heel thumped him in the chest as the man staggered and fell. The coyote crawled a few feet, then collapsed.

James scrambled on top of him. He dropped all his weight, panting into the coyote's ear, "Motherfucker!" He waited for the man to squirm or lash out, but the fight seemed to have gone out of him. James rolled off. Up on one knee, he flipped the coyote onto his back.

He blinked the sweat from his eyes.

And now, at last, he realized his mistake.

What he'd taken for a white shirt was the man's naked skin, ivory over his torso and arms, darker at the neck and wrists. A campesino's coloring. The man's chest was slight, and womanish, the ribs sharply defined. His breath came in fluttering gasps. He smelled badly of diesel fuel. James noted three pairs of pants, one on top of the other, and no shoes. The man's bare feet were bloody.

*Goddamnit!* Caught, coyotes often posed as just another pollo—but no coyote would ever travel barefoot.

An unexpected flash, and the man heaved upward. A blade drew down across James's left shin. His pantleg parted and flapped. He felt a sharp sting, blood dripping, and his stomach plunged—he'd been cut!—and then he was on his feet and kicking. His heel met the side of the man's flailing arm. The pollo grunted, and dropped his arm to the ground, the knife still clutched in his fist. James lifted his boot and stomped once. He heard a sickening crunch.

A gurgling sounded deep in the pollo's throat. He lifted his head, vomited a watery stream down his chest, then lay back.

James swooped down for the knife.

"Shouldn't've done that," he said.

The pollo stared up at him, breath wheezing and whistling. His eyes watered, washing into the lines of his face. He turned his cheek to the ground, muttering.

"Say what?" James peeled the fabric of his pantleg. He inspected the wound to his shin. A long slash, but shallow. He'd live.

"Coco," the pollo said.

*Coconut.* Brown on the outside, white where it counts.

"Fuck that," James said. He'd heard it before. But he wasn't the first, and he would not be the last. More than half the Patrol was Latino these days.

He examined the knife, an everyday, folding implement, with steel rivets and a plastic handle scored to look like ivory. He closed it and buried it in his pocket.

Clumsily, the pollo rose into a crouch. James tensed, but allowed it, knowing that this was the stance of submission: head down, fingers limp against the groin. The damaged hand was already swollen; the pollo had likely suffered a few broken bones. Stone-faced, he hunched forward, as if ashamed of his nakedness. Or maybe he was only cold.

James stood.

He pulled the pollo to his feet, then seized him by a skinny bicep. The man tucked his wounded hand up against his chest, like a bird with a broken wing.

James walked him back to the quarterhorse, gathering his lost equipment on the way. He slid the pistol into its holster, hung the goggles from a loop on his belt. Two thousand dollars a pop, he thought mournfully. The boss was going to flip.

They found the horse nosing in a pile of rocks. James dragged the pollo over, but when he indicated the stirrups, the man shook his head.

James hunkered down, twining his fingers together. “¡Ahora!” he commanded. *Now*. The pollo hesitated, then executed a feeble hop. Skidding a bare heel into James’s cupped palms, he lunged for the saddle horn. Suddenly, James appreciated how vulnerable he was. One good kick could snap his neck. He jerked away. But the man sat the horse calmly, seemingly indifferent. Relieved, James instructed him to move forward. No response. He prodded the pollo’s hip and the pollo wriggled awkwardly against the saddle horn.

James poked a boot into the stirrup. He hoisted up and slid in behind, groaning at the lightning bolt of pain in his hip. Though the pollo was small, two in the saddle was a tight fit. James unlocked the cuffs from his belt. Circling his arms about the man’s waist, he snapped the bracelets onto his wrists. He nudged the quarterhorse into a trot.

The pollo shivered. A bead of sweat rolled down his neck.

James twisted in the saddle. He loosened a bungee cord and pulled at a folded square of brown wool and shook it to one side. He draped the blanket over the pollo’s shoulders.

They came to the cut in the rock, and James walked the horse up, the pollo pressed against him. Gradually, the desert opened before them, a vista that never failed to take James’s breath. The few trees swayed in the breeze, leaves fluttering. Sand swirled like fog about the horse’s ankles.

The radio came crackling to life. James raised it to his lips.

“Leonardo,” he said.

“James,” his partner replied. “Where the fuck’ve you been?”

“In the canyon, looking for coyote.”

“For glory, I’d say. You see your name in lights.” A staticky pause. “You shoot him?”

“I did not.” Patrols used their guns only if directly attacked. But what

about the knife? Well, James had gotten even for that.

“You let him go?” Leo said.

“No, Goddamnit, I have him right here.” James added reluctantly, “But he’s no coyote.” He could hear Leo laughing.

“Maybe, old man, you ought to retire.”

“Fuck you.” James hated that old man stuff. He wasn’t even forty; soon, yes, but not yet.

Leo snorted. “And where the fuck’re you now?”

Without the goggles, the desert seemed a vast bowl tipped to spill its contents against the night sky. A multitude of stars pulsed behind clouds. James felt their hidden weight. He had a sense of portent, of warning—but he pushed it away. There was comfort, after all, in human insignificance. He drank in the hallowed silence in this, the one place in the world he felt most at home.

He said to Leo, “I’m here.”

“And what the fuck does that mean?”

James removed the goggles from his belt. He held them to his eyes. Nothing. He gave the casing a gentle shake, and the image came in. Christ, he thought. He was a lucky man. Because there was Leo in hot green miniature, slouched in the saddle, head cocked to one side. The captured illegals were tied together in a scooped-out crater of sand.

Leo raised a gloved hand. He danced his black mare.

James felt the pollo’s spine go rigid as steel.

Then and there he decided the broken hand was payback enough. He would say nothing regarding the knife. A medic would set the pollo’s hand at the station before sending him home; and if the pollo was smart, he would not fuss about his injury, much less explain.

“Fuck.” Leo’s drawl floated over the wire. The living voice followed an instant later, an echo carried on the thin desert air. “You mean *here*.”

Grimly mute, nine men sat with their backs to the van’s inside walls. Several were shirtless, shoeless, and empty-handed, relieved in advance of whatever goods they’d tried to bring north.

Leo and James stood out on the highway’s blacktop, horses tied to a steel

guardrail.

“Looks like Anteater took ‘em all for a ride.” Leo grinned.

James peered into the rear of the van. “Señores,” he addressed the pollos, “who was it led you over the line?”

Silence.

“¿Sus cosas,” James said, “quién se las robó?” *Who stole your things?*

More silence.

“¿El Oso Hormiguero?”

El Oso Hormiguero—Anteater. A coyote new to this stretch of the line, but famous already for his long snoutlike nose, a sticky reach that could locate possessions wherever hidden. Within weeks, it seemed, he’d built a lucrative practice smuggling Mexican nationals across the border, then abandoning them to bandidos for a prearranged cut.

“I’d like to get that bastard,” James said.

“Guy must have a stash,” Leo said. “Whole lotta polyester and dead radios. Didn’t grab it all, though. Here . . . catch.” He tossed something at James, a thin chain with an oval-shaped medal attached, silver inlaid with mother-of-pearl. James ran a thumb over the etching. Our Lady of Guadalupe, beloved patroness of Mexico.

“Where’d you get this?”

“Found it,” Leo smirked, “in the sand.” Which meant he’d taken it off one of the prisoners.

A gust of wind pushed at James’s back. He said to Leo, “You might at least look ashamed.”

Leo stared, unperturbed. A faint bruise still darkened the skin beneath his left eye, and James acknowledged to himself that he’d put it there. Well, they’d both been drinking after the shift—a bad idea, beer in the a.m.—and they’d scuffled stupidly in James’s front yard, with James the victor, and James’s wife the only witness. Though he couldn’t have said now what it was they’d been fighting about, he remembered perfectly his satisfaction that Mercedes had seen.

Idly, the van’s driver revved the engine.

James flipped the medal over and squinted at the microscopic lettering: *Blessed Virgin In Heaven Pray For Us Sinners On Earth.*

"I hate that religious shit," Leo said. "Speaking of which, get a load of this." He reached into the van, grabbed a young pollo with lips plumped beneath a mustache like a curl of black smoke. Leo pulled the boy forward, turning him so that his naked back was displayed. The flesh was crisscrossed with scars.

Lash marks by the dozens, James realized. And underneath, the Seal of Obligation. He counted six long cuts: three down, three across.

"They're baaack," Leo sang.

James said, "Be Holy Week soon." He asked the pollo, "You a Penitente?" With his cuffed hands, the pollo made the sign of the cross.

"¿Vienen a la morada?" asked James, and the boy dropped his chin to his chest.

The Penitentes—what remained of the sect—were supposedly confined to the mountains of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. But James knew it wasn't entirely so. During the Lenten season, he'd seen La Hermandad on the square in El Pílon, walking barefooted, dressed in their white trousers and black hoods. Self-scourging, to suffer as Christ had suffered. James didn't get it, though he supposed he understood guilt well enough. The morada, their chapel, was rumored to be somewhere out east. In seventeen years he'd never once come upon it. It was buried in one of the canyons, maybe, tucked under a jagged outcropping of rock. Impossible to find unless you knew where to look. That land, he thought, was owned by the rattlesnakes and scorpions.

Leo said, "Mercedes'll go for it."

James stared at his partner, who tipped his chin, indicating the medal in James's hand.

"Stuff." Leo winked. "That's what our girl wants. Take my word for it, old man."

Leo had a funny attitude about Mercedes sometimes. He'd dated her first, and that made for tension with James. But two men would always want the same girl, one would always lose.

As far as the job was concerned, they did well enough, though James didn't really like the guy, and he didn't trust him, either, not entirely. Leo was the youngest partner he'd ever had, all hard, reflective surface, and who knew what lay underneath. Too often he behaved as if the world had been created for

his personal entertainment. There was something dangerous about that. James might've complained. He might've requested another partner. He might've dug deeper, or, God knows, sympathized. What he'd done instead was cut the guy out. Small things; but that was dangerous, too.

James felt his own jealousy there. Leo was such a healthy handsome animal, so clearly at the beginning of things. Less than two years out of Patrol School, he'd been in the elite Horse Patrol from the start. Unlike James, who'd walked the streets for ten years.

"And with what this job pays . . ." Leo left it hanging.

The standard lament. And Leo, he'd observed, had expensive tastes. Leo wore nice clothes, he took fancy vacations, he drove a new Jeep. He liked to talk about getting-rich-quick. The Internet, maybe, or the lottery.

James considered his own check, woefully slim, and never enough. It all went for—what? Food, he supposed. Insurance. The mortgage on the house, the loan on the truck. At home, unpaid bills sat on the kitchen counter: MasterCard and Sears and Montgomery Ward. Because he and Mercedes had to have furniture, they had to have appliances. There was also the matter of the ten thousand he'd borrowed last year from his folks. He'd gotten into a scrape on the job and needed the money for legal fees. James had promised to pay it all back, with interest, and he tried, giving a little each month. But it was a token, and he knew it and they knew it. Mercedes, too.

He leaned into the van, swung the silver chain from a crooked forefinger. He asked the pollos, "¿De quién es esto?"

Averted faces meant no one was willing to admit ownership. James shook his head. Nothing left to lose, and still these people were reluctant to draw attention to themselves. He wondered whose sister or mother would cry.

A light flashed in the sky, followed by the faint whopping of chopper blades. James lifted a hand to his eyes. An INS helicopter was flying in low from the west, its search beam tracking the desert floor. White glare, a deafening mechanical wail. The wind raised a cloud of biting sand and the horses reared, snorting and whinnying. The pollos covered their ears as the chopper passed overhead, aiming eastward to the glow of Corville. Across the border, the lights of El Pilón flickered, the Mexican town all but invisible.

The chopper circled back, again flying low. The van's driver shouted into his radio, "Goddamn you, Fred! You hot-dog fuck!"

The pilot whooped. "I'm bringin' her in!"

"Aren't you supposed to be in Yuma tonight?"

"Yes, I am! But hell, a man's got to take a break sometime. I'm going to park her at the station and head on over the line, down to Efraín's. I'm in the mood for huevos."

Leo said to James, "Chichis, more like." He cupped his hands in front of his chest. "I hear there's a young goddess works the graveyard at Efraín's."

A burst of static, and the pilot said, ". . . Reese around?"

James shouted up to the driver, "Tell Fred I'll catch up with him tomorrow. Same place, same time. Tell him I plan on taking *all* his money."

But the driver yelled back, "Sensors are picking up footfalls. South-southeast, Sector Forty-nine." Above them, the chopper dipped and swung away.

James reached for the door handles. A dusty foot thrust forward.

"What the fuck?" Leo said.

One of the pollos scuttled forward on his ass. "Mi sombrero, señor."

Leo's arm shot out. He cracked the man on the side of the head. The pollo fell back, but immediately crept up again, now staring balefully at James. He held a fat limp hand to his chest. Christ. It was the man who'd cut him, the one he'd ridden in on his horse.

"Mi sombrero," the pollo insisted.

Leo lifted his arm to strike him again.

"Wait a goddamn second!" James said. Over Leo's protests he asked, "¿Qué quiere?"

The pollo rubbed his cuffed hands over his hair.

Suddenly, James remembered the white thing twirling as the pollo had disappeared down into the canyon. *A hat*. With all this campesino had endured, he still cared about a hat.

"Lo siento," James said. "Ya estuvo, señor." *I'm sorry. It's done now.*

The driver shouted back, "You guys ready yet? Sensors're goin' nuts here."

“Fuck,” Leo said. “I hate Forty-nine.” Several miles east, the sector folded in against a round hill, where a trickling creek fattened the scrub and the hiding places of the pollos were hard to get at. “But hey,” Leo said, “you heard yet when we’re going to get to that fire? Smoke the vermin!” INS had been trying to schedule a controlled burn for days. “What’s the word from Danny Patillo?”

Patillo was Corville Station’s fireboss, one of James’s poker buddies.

“He’s waiting,” James said, “for the wind to die down.”

He slammed the van’s doors.

The driver flashed his turn signal and pulled out. The two lanes wore a fresh coat of blacktop, split by a broken white line that wiggled just past the turnout, as if the paint truck had gone out of control. For a few seconds, the van straddled the line, then it drifted back into its lane. The tail lights receded, parallel sets of staring red eyes. The pollos were headed home. James felt a momentary tightness in his chest.

Leo untied his horse. He climbed into the saddle and looked down on James. “Pinche pollos,” he said.

James heard a challenge in this, one he saw neither point nor profit in answering. Sand had worked its way under his uniform and he plucked his shirt from his chest, lifted his feet, and shook out his legs.

Leo gave him a disgusted look.

James scrubbed his hands over his face. There was a smell on his skin, something he didn’t like but couldn’t quite identify.

Abruptly, Leo pulled on the reins. He turned his horse, high-stepped it off the highway. A trot became a canter, and then a gallop. Sand flew from the animal’s hooves.

Silence fell like a blanket thrown from the sky.

James watched his partner ride, Leo on the black mare growing smaller and smaller—another grain, another star—until at last he was indistinguishable from the landscape that surrounded him.